

INTRODUCTION

This is the fifth message in the series from 1 Thessalonians entitled, "Finding Hope in a Hopeless World." This message is entitled, "Church: Where God Puts the Lonely in a Family."

Over the past few years I've been devoting a lot of attention to what makes a church spiritually healthy. God has allowed me to write a curriculum entitled "What Healthy Churches Do." This training material has been translated into a number of foreign languages and is being used to train thousands of international pastors.

But in the process of learning about a healthy church, I've also discovered there are some sick churches out there. A better term might be a "dysfunctional church." In fact, I've come up with my own humorous top ten list of the ways to tell if you're attending a dysfunctional church. You know you're in a dysfunctional church when:

10. The ushers frisk everyone before they enter.
9. The name of the church is "Wrath of God Community Church"
8. The music director leads the choir with a whip.
7. Every baptismal candidate is required to watch the movie "Titanic."
6. The VBS theme is: "Ten Plagues of Egypt."
5. There are parking meters in the church parking lot.
4. Deacons meetings begin with the chairman saying, "Let's get ready to ruuuuumble!"
3. Visitors are required to put their bank account number on the guest form.
2. Requirements for teaching middle school students include martial arts training.
1. "The Theological and Ontological Significance of the Eschatological Ramifications of the Pre-millennial view of Predestination... Part 4."

The Apostle Paul was a missionary, but he was also the original church planter. Whenever he entered a city, he preached the good news that Jesus can save sinners. Although he faced a lot of rejection and opposition, there were always people who converted to Christ. And when he left that city, there was a new church. Even though Paul only spent three weeks in Thessalonica because he was run out of town, he considered himself to be the spiritual parent of the congregation. Notice the words he used to describe his affection for the members of the church.

1 Thessalonians 2:5-12. "You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

Over the past forty years, I've seen an increase in what I call church-bashing. Like every pastor, I've heard people say something like, "I love Jesus, I just don't like the church." Surveys have shown some of the younger generation of Christians are disillusioned with the church. Last spring, *Newsweek's* cover proclaimed, "Forget the Church—Follow Jesus." And yet saying you love Jesus but don't like the church is like saying you love to swim but you don't like the water. The church is the body of Christ.

Joshua Harris wrote a book whose title I love. It's called *Stop Dating the Church and Fall in Love with the Family of God*. I think one of the reasons some people reject the church is they don't understand the true nature of the church. They think of the church as an organization, like PTA or AARP. The church isn't an organization; it is a living organism. Or others think of the church as a club, like the Rotary Club or the Lions Club. The church isn't a club; it's a family. The church isn't an institution like a university or a government; it's a family.

One of the most beautiful portraits of God is found in Psalms 68. The Bible describes God as, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families." (Psalm 68:5-6)

The church is the setting in which God puts the lonely into a family. Rick Warren wrote, "Church is not a place you go to; church is a family you belong to." When God puts you into His forever family, there are both blessings and responsibilities. I want to discuss the benefits first, and then we'll consider the opportunities.

I. YOUR BLESSINGS OF BEING INCLUDED IN GOD'S FAMILY

When Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica, he compared his love for the church with the love of a mother and a father. These are family relationships. The actual phrase, "The Family of God" doesn't appear in the Bible, but there are dozens of scriptures that refer to the church as a family.

This family not only extends to believers here on earth, but believers in heaven are also part of God's family. Paul wrote, "For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." (Ephesians 3:14-15 NKJV)

God's family is a forever family. We become a part of his family here on earth, and even after we die, we're still part of God's family in heaven. There are two primary blessings we receive from being a part of God's family.

A. We share a relationship with the same Father

A biological family is traditionally defined by blood origins and common ancestry. But Jesus gave a new definition for a new kind of family: God's family.

We sometimes forget Jesus had a biological family. Mary was his mother, and Joseph was his stepfather. The only glimpse we have of Jesus' childhood is when He is in the Temple amazing the Temple scholars. He told Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know that I had to be about my

Father's business?" He wasn't talking about carpentry; that was Joseph's business. He was talking about the Word of God, His heavenly Father's business. After that incident when Jesus was twelve, we never hear again about Joseph. Most scholars assume he died before Jesus began his ministry at age 30.

In Mark 3 we read about how Jesus' biological family came asking for Him. The Bible says, "Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind.'" (Mark 3:20-21) Let's face it, what if your 30-year-old son or brother left his good job as a carpenter and went about claiming to be the Messiah? You'd probably think he was one enchilada short of a combination platter, too!

We read, "Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.' 'Who are my mother and brothers?' he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:31-34)

Eventually, His biological family believed He really was the Son of God. His half-brother James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James. Another half-brother, Jude, wrote the short book nestled just before Revelation. Jesus always loved and honored His mother. She was at the cross where Jesus asked John to take care of her. After the resurrection, Mary is mentioned being with the disciples who were praying in the upper room on the day of Pentecost; then she is never mentioned again in the New Testament.

If you read this passage and only hear Jesus gently rebuffing His biological family, you miss the point. Jesus used the presence of His natural family to teach us that there is another family, a much larger family in which you and I can find acceptance: the Family of God.

Some people claim every citizen on the face of the planet is a child of God. Some want to claim that every person is part of the family of God. That's sounds popular; it sounds politically correct. To say we're all God's children is an attractive, tolerant way to speak about people today, but it's not in the Bible.

In fact a few years ago, the great theologian, country singer Alan Jackson made this claim in a song. He sang: "Here comes a Baptist, here comes a Jew; There goes a Mormon and a Muslim too. I see a Buddhist and a Hindu; I see a Catholic and I see you. We're all God's children; We're all God's children; We're all God's children. Why can't we be one big happy family?"

The reason we can't be one big happy family is that we AREN'T all children of God. Everyone is a creation of God, but only those who believe in Jesus have God as their Father.

Jesus said there are two Fathers and two families. He said these words to the Pharisees, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire." (John 8:44) The fact that those who are not saved are not children of God is also seen in 1 John 3:10. The Bible says, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are:

Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

B. We share fellowship with our siblings

At the very beginnings of the church, a strange thing began to happen. The people who followed Jesus began to refer to each other as "brother" and "sister," even though they were not related at all. Pretty soon most of them were not even from the same race!

This was a new group identity, held together by more than common aims, or common hobbies, or common ancestry. It is a forever family, connected through time and space, and held together by the overwhelming joy of the love of God, and by the freedom bought and paid for by Jesus.

We have almost two billion brothers and sisters around the world. There is great power in numbers. All by ourselves, we're not much, but when we join with our brothers and sisters we become a powerful force. One or two snowflakes don't cause much damage. But when you get millions of snowflakes together, they can shut down an entire city. The same is true of the church.

There is power in numbers. A few years ago *Reader's Digest* published a joke about a hunter in Africa who was walking through the jungle. He came upon a huge dead rhinoceros. Standing next to the slain rhinoceros was a Pygmy. He said, "Did you kill that rhino?" The Pygmy said, "Yes, I killed it with my club." The astonished hunter said, "Wow, how big is your club?" The Pygmy said, "There are about a hundred of us." There is power in numbers.

Through the years I've notice when I meet a believer overseas, I feel an immediate kinship with them. When I met pastors in Uganda, I felt a closer relationship with them that I do with Americans who don't follow Jesus.

In 1979 the Pittsburg Pirates were playing against the Baltimore Orioles in the World Series. The Orioles had the best record in the Major Leagues and were favored to win. The Pirates were down three games to one. Baltimore needed to only one more win to clinch the series. But Pittsburg had something that the Orioles didn't have. They had a theme song. They had adopted the song "We are Family" recorded that year by Sister Sledge. They played it throughout the games at the stadium. The words were simple: "We are family. I got all my sisters and me. We are family. Get up everybody and sing." That song and that team united them, and they won the next three games in a row to win the World Series. It's the last time the Pirates won the World Series.

That could be the theme song of every church. We are family! I got all my sisters and brothers with me. We are family! Get up everybody and sing!"

II. YOUR OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE IN GOD'S FAMILY

There are many blessings we receive from being a part of God's family, but there are also

responsibilities. In this passage we see three important opportunities we have to serve in God's family.

A. Like a gentle mother, we care for each other

Paul used maternal words when he wrote, "We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." (1 Thessalonians 2:7) The word was used of a protective mother nursing her children. It was a word that was used to describe how a mother hen covered her chicks with her wings. It's the word Jesus used when He wept over Jerusalem in Matthew 23. He said, "How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."

We live in such an impersonal culture. People are electronically connected through texting, Facebook, and Twitter, but people are lonely. People are longing for real relationships.

That's what we should offer to people, the gentle caring like a mother loving her child.

I read a recent article about how people in Japan are so busy that older people can now rent a family. Here's the quote: "In Japan, you can rent a family. Elderly Japanese who are isolated from their children by the frantic pace of modern life can rent a 'family' for lunch and a few hours. Just call Nippon Kokasei Honbu and ask for a son, daughter, grandchild, whatever relative you want, and that type will show up at your door and greet you as if they haven't seen you in years. Of course the service isn't cheap: three hours with your family costs \$1,130, plus transportation. Satsuki Ohiwa founded the business in 1990 when, as a businesswoman, she was too busy to visit her mother. Company staff visited her instead, and Ohiwa deemed it a success. Ohiwa's observation of her customers is not surprising. She said, 'What is common about our clients is that they are thirsty for human love.'" I wonder when someone in the U.S. will start offering that! But you can save yourself the cost of renting someone who acts like they love you. You can be a part of a local church family like Green Acres where people will love you like a mother for free!

B. Like a hard worker, we serve each other

Paul was careful to point out that he wasn't a financial burden to the church. He carried his own weight. He wrote, "Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you." (1 Thessalonians 2:9)

We know from Acts 18 that Paul had a skill as a tentmaker. When he came to Thessalonica, he didn't expect the church to pay him any money. Instead he worked hard to earn his keep as a tentmaker.

There is a problem that existed in Paul's day and it still exists. There are people who use religion or faith as a means to get rich. There is a heresy going around today called the prosperity gospel. It's where preachers tell people to give money to their ministry and they will get rich as a result.

This dangerous prosperity gospel is spreading around the world and poor Christians are the targets. Pastor Emmy from Uganda told me this prosperity gospel has infiltrated into Uganda, one of the poorest nations on earth. He said a woman came to see him and asked him to pray for her. She asked him how much she would have to pay him to pray for her. Emmy was shocked and told her he would pray for her for free.

Paul wrote elsewhere that a workman is worthy of his hire and those that teach the Word are worthy of double honor, but he demonstrated he didn't receive money from the churches. He could work for a living. In his second letter Paul wrote, "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

Here in the church, we serve one another. We aren't here to see what we can GET. We're here to see how we can give. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive.

C. Like a loving father, we encourage each other

Not only did Paul love them like a mother, and serve them like a worker, he encouraged them like a good father. He wrote, "We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God." (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12)

That's what dads do, we encourage our kids. Dads, here are two things you should be saying to your children on a regular basis. "I love you and I'm proud of you."

I say that because the most perfect Father in the Universe is God the Father and that's what He said to His son Jesus. When Jesus was baptized by John there was a voice from heaven and God said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17) He was telling Jesus He loved Him, and that He was proud of Him. Dads, that's the best way for your encourage your kids.

And the Bible teaches that the main reason we gather together as a church is to encourage one another. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

CONCLUSION

How do you join God's Family? Think about it, there are only three ways you can join a biological family. You can be born into it. You can be adopted into a family. Or you can marry into a family. The Bible teaches that we enter God's family in the same three ways.

Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be born again to see the Kingdom of Heaven. We enter God's family through a new birth. The Bible says, "To all who received him, (Jesus) to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent ...but born of God." (John 1:12-13)

When you were born the first time, you were born into the wrong family. That's why you need to be born again. And when you receive Jesus as your Savior you experience a new birth into God's family.

The second way you join a family is through adoption. When you're adopted a family has chosen you. And the Bible says that God has chosen us to be a part of His family "You received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" (Romans 8:15)

The usual word for "Father" in the Bible was *pater*. That's the formal word, but when Jesus talked to God, He called Him *Abba*, which means "Daddy" or "Papa." And the Holy Spirit allows us to cry out to God in this intimate way. You can call the Creator of the Universe, "Papa."

The third way you enter a family is by marrying into it. And this picture is also found in the New Testament. The Church is called the Bride of Christ and Jesus loves us like husband loves his wife. Paul makes it clear when he wrote, "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him." (2 Corinthians 11:2)

The church isn't perfect, because it's made up of imperfect people. But we serve a perfect Savior. Are you a part of God's Forever Family. He wants you to be in His family. Don't wait until you find a perfect church. You never will.

I love the little poem that says: If you should find the perfect church; Without one fault or smear; For goodness sake, don't join that church; You'd spoil the atmosphere! But since no perfect church exists; (We're all imperfect men); Then please stop looking for that church; And love the church you're in. So keep on serving in your church; Until the Resurrection. And then we all will be the Church; Without an imperfection!

The church isn't a club; it isn't an institution; it isn't an organization; it's a family. Everybody needs a family. Whether you're young, old, single or married, you need a family. Loneliness is the reason so many people are desperate. Consider all the popular songs about loneliness. Roy Orbison sang, "Only the lonely know the way I feel tonight." Elvis crooned, "Are you lonesome tonight?" Hank Williams sang, "I'm so lonesome I could cry." And the Beatles sang, "Ah, look at all the lonely people." Someone said cities are just places where thousands of people can be lonely together.

The sad truth is that there are millions of lonely people who need a church family. Three weeks before Christmas in 1993, 43-year old Wolfgang Dircks died while watching television in his Berlin apartment. His rent continued to be paid out of his bank account, and none of his neighbors noticed he was gone. Five years later when his bank account was depleted the landlord entered the apartment and found his skeletal remains in his chair. The *TV Guide* in his lap was turned to December 3, 1993. His television set had long since burned out. It's a sad story, but every year thousands of people are found dead days or weeks after their solitary deaths. How many thousands of lonely people there must be out there?

That's why we exist as a church. We are the place where God puts the lonely into a family, but you are the hands and feet of Christ. We must reach out and show the love of Jesus to people who are lonely.

OUTLINE

"A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families." *Psalm 68:5-6*

I. YOUR BLESSINGS OF BEING INCLUDED IN GOD'S FAMILY

"For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." *Ephesians 3:14-15 NKJV*

A. We share a relationship with the same Father

B. We share fellowship with our siblings

II. YOUR OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE IN GOD'S FAMILY

A. Like a gentle mother, we care for each other

"We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." *1 Thessalonians 2:7*

B. Like a hard worker, we serve each other

"Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you." *1 Thessalonians 2:9*

C. Like a loving father, we encourage each other

"We dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God." *1 Thessalonians 2:11-12*

— MESSAGE DISCLAIMER —

These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.



David O. Dykes, Pastor
Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes